

The story is told of a mentally challenged child by the name of Chad. He loved school; although, he was teased and taunted almost daily by the kids in his class. Even though the children made it clear they didn't want him to participate in their games, he never gave up hoping and asking and tagging along behind them.

One day he announced to his mother that he was going to make a valentine for each one of his classmates. Though his mother feared that it would only be one more thing where he would get hurt by the kids' reactions, she painstakingly helped him make valentines, one for each child.

On the night before Valentine's Day, he carefully reexamined each valentine and placed them into his tote bag for distribution the next day. She prayed for Chad that night, asking that God would protect his spirit and keep him from getting crushed with cruel remarks. After sending him off to school the next morning, she quickly baked some of his favorite chocolate chip cookies to serve him when he arrived home.

Just before he was about to come home, she placed the freshly baked cookies on a plate, poured a tall glass of cold milk, and waited for him to come through the door. She feared that Chad would come home disappointed, because, though he remembered all of his classmates, she feared he would not be remembered by any of his classmates.

The door opened and in ran Chad. He was so excited, he didn't even see the cookies or milk on the table. He marched right on by with a big smile on his face and toward his room.

"I have some cookies and milk for you, honey," she shouted.

"Not a one, Not a one, I didn't miss a single one of them!" he exclaimed.

After a short while, he came back into the kitchen and once again announced that he was so happy because he hadn't forgotten a single one of his classmates. He had given a valentine to each one of them. His mother hugged him and said, "I'm so proud of you honey. You're the very best boy a mom could ever want!"

Later, when his mother looked through his tote bag it was obvious he himself hadn't received any valentines.

The earthly story of Chad gives us a glimpse of the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus came to earth for one reason—to redeem the world. He came for all people, of every ethnicity, so that "the world would not perish," so that "those who believe in Him might have everlasting life." He came in love to love bullies and the bullied, to forgive those who taunted and teased Him, to bring reconciliation between Him and those who were His enemies. He came forgetting not a single one of us.

Over the last four weeks of Advent, we've examined the different facets of Christmas love. As we've reviewed the Scriptures, we've seen how Jesus was the Master Lover, the One who always knew exactly what to say or do in order to convey God's love. In fact, we have seen how He used all of the primary love languages spoken of by Gary Chapman in his book, **The Five Love Languages.**

We started with the primary love language of time. St. Paul said, “But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:3-4). The Creator of time and space came in time and space to redeem mankind, and the promise is that He will come again, a second and final time to judge the living and the dead. We acknowledged that time was life and when you give time to someone, you give life away. Jesus came in time to give His life away for us. As He gave us time, so His desire is that we give others our time in sharing His love.

On the second week, we discussed the primary love language of affirmation. Once again, we quickly saw how God, over and over again, in Scripture affirms His people, assuring them of His love. Isaiah affirmed us with the words, “Comfort, comfort my people... (your) sin has been paid for” (Isa. 40:1-2). Forgiveness is Christmas love. It is this love that we share when we affirm one another.

On the third week, we discussed the love language of service. Jesus came for one purpose--to die. It was a supreme act of love that took Him to the cross. We saw how He fulfilled the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah in that He brought “good news to the poor... (mended) the brokenhearted... (brought) freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Isa. 61:1). We were challenged to do likewise, to bring Christmas love to others through our acts of service.

Last week, we examined the importance of touch. We saw how Jesus always touched those He healed. We saw how He embraced sinners. We acknowledged that too often in this season, we have a tendency to overdo the pastels—the gentle blues and golds—picturing only a pretty baby Jesus in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes, and forget this Child in the manger became the man on the cross. He could only touch our hearts and souls with forgiveness through the shedding of His blood. Because of His sacrificial death and resurrection, we now can embrace one another in love—Christmas love.

Today we remember the primary love language of gift giving. A person whose primary love language is gift giving feels most loved when he receives gifts. Though few people seem to have this as their primary love language, yet at Christmas we exchange gifts. The ultimate reason why is because the greatest Gift—the Gift of Jesus—came to us that first Christmas.

Some suggest that the idea of gift giving at Christmas goes back to the Scripture in Matthew 2:10-11 which tells us Wise Men brought gifts to Jesus at his home. Giving gifts can be a part of what St. Paul described in 2 Corinthians 8:7-8: “Since you excel in so many ways—you have so much faith, such gifted speakers, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, and such love for us that now I want you to excel also in this gracious ministry of giving. I am not saying you must do it, even though the other churches are eager to do it. This is one way to prove your love is real.” Paul, of course, was speaking of financial gifts so that he could keep on doing the ministry; however, whatever the reason for the gift, he makes it clear, it is a way of showing God’s love. So at Christmas, we show Christ’s love by giving to others.

The story recorded in Luke 2:1-20 is so well known to all of us that many of us can recite it by heart. Though we can, we must not overlook the meaning of the story.

Think about the shepherds if you would. They were third-class citizens, at least, in the eyes of most of the people in Bethlehem. Someone suggested that in today's world they could be compared to bikers who are often thought to be crass and unkempt. Imagine a bunch of bikers coming into town on their motorcycles to visit a newborn king?

The shepherds were tending sheep. The lambs they were herding were the very lambs that would be offered as temple sacrifices. But now, in Bethlehem, not far from where they were stationed, the Lamb of God was born. The announcement must have startled them, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:10).

God had come to earth. Think about it! He's God and He came to earth. The eternal, timeless One entered days and weeks and years. Why? To reward us for being good? Hardly. The verdict was always the same: "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any who understand, and seek God. But they are all gone aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:2-3).

The shepherds must have known. Their consciences must have convicted them, because we are told "they were terrified" (Lk. 2:9). But for the shepherds, and for us, the Good News is that God entered into the world with a gift—the gift of His Son—to clean us up. To scrub the floors and ceilings of our hearts and souls so that we might be made clean—righteous in God's eyes!

Though the shepherds returned to their watching and caring for the flocks, they returned with different hearts and souls! They had been changed by the Savior of the world, just as we have been. They were no longer terrified; they were joyful in knowing a Savior had been born for the worst of them, a Savior who had come to redeem them.

As He came to give the shepherds of old a gift, so He steps into our lives through Word and Sacrament to give us the gift of salvation. He steps into our lives to forgive us for the many times we have failed to demonstrate Christmas love through our time, affirmation, acts of service, touch and gift giving. He steps into our lives to restore us and make us what we cannot make of ourselves! Should we be any where but here today in celebration of that gift?

The sharing of His love continues each time we give gifts to one another. For the person whose primary love language is gifts, he feels most loved when he receives gifts from others. It usually makes little difference how expensive the gift is, or if it was bought, or homemade, the thought is what fills the person's "love tank."

During Christmas, our gift giving is a response of gratefulness for the gift of Jesus. Even as we share our gifts, we might find it appropriate to share why we like to give gifts during this season. In this way, we share Jesus not only with a gift but with our words as well.

When you give someone a gift, you say to that person, “I was thinking about you.” Gift giving, unless you have someone else buy the gifts for you, always requires some thought, some preparation on your part. One part of gift giving that I do for my wife is to wrap the gifts I give to her. Now mind you, if it was up to me, gifts could go unwrapped. One could just place them in a box or an empty bag. However, my wife loves opening gifts. My wrapping the present becomes part of my gift of her.

As we exchange gifts this Christmas day, we exchange visual signs of love for one another. Jesus came in the “flesh.” He became visible to demonstrate God’s great love for us and to do what in the flesh we could not do—atone for our sins. As you exchange gifts today, sit back and quietly observe the smiles on the faces of the recipients and know that God’s love is being shared.

There is a humorous story of a woman who was in a rush to get her Christmas cards mailed. She hurriedly purchased 50 cards without looking at the message inside. She signed and addressed all but one, and then dropped them in the mailbox. She never bothered to look at the greeting inside, until one day when she glanced at the one remaining card and read, “This card is just to say a little gift is on the way.” Imagine her surprise!

We’ve learned over the last five weeks that there are many ways to share Christmas love, including gift-giving. Whatever five ways we use—time, affirmation, service, touch or gifts—the most important thing is that we do share His love so that in small ways others might get glimpses of His love.

As you leave remember, “Do not be afraid, (there is) good news of great joy...a Savior has been born to you, He is Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:11). No matter what other gifts you may receive this Christmas Day, be assured none will surpass the gift of Jesus.

A blessed Christmas to you and your family. Amen.